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(AMCIS)

2005

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Richard Baskerville

Georgia State University, baskerville@acm.org

Mike Chiasson

University of Calgary, mike.chiasson@haskayne.ucalgary.ca

Allen Lee

Virginia Commonwealth University, AllenSLee@alum.mit.edu

Lars Mathiassen

Georgia State University, lars.mathiassen@eci.gsu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Baskerville, Richard; Chiasson, Mike; Lee, Allen; and Mathiassen, Lars, "Educing Theory from Practice: Developing Significant Theory from Action Research" (2005). *AMCIS 2005 Proceedings*. 482.

<http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2005/482>

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Educating Theory from Practice: Developing Significant Theory from Action Research

Richard Baskerville
Georgia State University
baskerville@acm.org

Mike Chiasson
University of Calgary
mike.chiasson@haskayne.ucalgary.ca

Allen Lee
Virginia Commonwealth University
allenslee@alum.mit.edu

Lars Mathiassen
Georgia State University
Lars.Mathiassen@eci.gsu.edu

ABSTRACT

The highly practical nature of action research sometimes leads to results that have little to contribute in terms of new scholarly knowledge. Although a difficult practical problem may have been resolved, academic publications will often reject reports of the results because the theoretical value is trivial. It appears necessary for IS theory, knowledge and methods to be selected and operationalized in advance, in order to prevent research studies from spiraling into consulting projects of little theoretical interest. However, the most valuable venues for action research often lie in the intractable problems of practice -- problems that cannot be directly fixed by existing knowledge. In addition, the selection of theory and methods may happen dynamically in real settings, as the problem and various solutions are explored. How do action researchers account for their methods and results given the current logic of science and the development and testing of theory? How are multi-method approaches used in action research in order to create opportunities in arriving at relevant theoretical results?

Keywords (Required)

Action research, research methodology, qualitative research, intensive research.

SYNOPSIS

This half-day workshop focuses on the discovery or development of new or enhanced theory within the action research process. The highly practical nature of action research sometimes leads to results that have little to contribute in terms of new scholarly knowledge. Although a difficult practical problem may have been resolved, academic publications will often reject reports of the results because the theoretical value is trivial. How can action researchers avoid this pitfall? How can new or enhanced theories be developed within the action research framework? What are the indications of potentially significant theoretical contributions within an action research study?

The workshop will examine the nature of the contributions from several published action research studies, as each panelist discusses how the studies develop theory. Exercises engage workshop participants in examining hypothetical and real action research settings to determine the potential theoretical outcomes of the studies.

Richard Baskerville highlights the best venues and research problems of action research: intractable problems of practice, problems that existing knowledge cannot seem to fix, are places rich with potential for new theories.

Mike Chiasson will illustrate various ways IS theory and practice are balanced to (1) prevent research studies from spiraling into consulting projects of little theoretical interest and (2) transform and mobilize theory into relevance for specific problems.

Allen Lee will show how the logic of science is ultimately no different for the development and testing of theory that happens to unfold in real-world settings involving real-world interventions and real-world evidence. Avoiding the pitfalls of trivial theoretical developments means action researchers must detect the significant contributions to theory.

Lars Mathiassen will use practical examples combined with research methodological rationales to show why and how researchers can mix action research with other research methods, like experiments and case studies. These multi-method approaches, with action research as the basic method, lead to relevant and publishable theoretical results.